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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH MINISTER FOR MANPOWER
AND SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE NG ENG HEN

¶1. Summary. Minister for Manpower and Second Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen expressed his satisfaction with the deepening bilateral ties between the U.S. and Singapore, and highlighted our excellent military cooperation in a March 22 courtesy call with Ambassador Herbold. Minister Ng also discussed the challenges of managing an aging domestic workforce and a growing foreign labor pool, including the need to improve protections for foreign maids. End Summary.

Bilateral Defense Cooperation

¶2. Minister for Manpower and Second Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen told Ambassador Herbold on March 22 that he highly valued the close relationship between the United States and Singapore, noting that we see eye-to-eye on many issues and cooperate very well on defense issues in particular. He stated that Singapore greatly appreciates the United States' actions in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and said that Singapore was glad to contribute to those efforts in "some small way."

¶3. Ambassador Herbold thanked Singapore for its support in Iraq and Afghanistan, adding that our close defense relationship has been helpful in other ways as well. She thanked Minister Ng for Singapore's deployment of helicopters to support the Katrina rescue and recovery effort, and pointed to the good work the United States and Singapore had done cooperating on tsunami relief. Ng responded that, for the Singaporean officers in Texas, it had seemed "natural" to become involved in the Katrina relief efforts, and they were "honored and thrilled" to make an important contribution. He noted that both Katrina and the tsunami gave Singapore troops the opportunity to work closely with U.S. troops in a real operation, which is invaluable experience.

Labor Issues

¶4. The Ambassador inquired about Singapore's recent efforts at job redesign and retraining aimed at helping older and lower-skilled workers stay in the workforce. Ng said that "job redesign" was a worthwhile attempt, but ultimately it would not solve the structural unemployment problem. Singaporeans cannot compete with Vietnamese or Chinese workers, so Singapore cannot over-rely on labor-intensive industries. The GOS therefore is concentrating on educating and training its workforce for service and high-tech industries, and will continue to rely on foreign talent to fill in the gaps. The Ambassador remarked that Singapore's management of its foreign worker population certainly did reduce illegal immigration. Ng agreed, but noted that Singapore's "draconian" regulations make it unpopular. For example, European countries have pushed Singapore to grant citizenship to anyone who works here for over five years -- something Singapore, as a country of four million surrounded by a billion poor, low-wage workers, "absolutely could not do," he said.

¶5. At the same time, however, Singapore has taken a hard line on abuse and exploitation: if an employer mistreats his workers, he will be punished, Ng said. Singapore could do better in some areas such as housing and safety for foreign workers, he conceded. While the GOS currently sets health and safety standards for housing, he said, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) ultimately wants all foreign workers to live in dormitories with good boarding and recreational facilities. The Ambassador asked about treatment of maids, which continues to receive press attention. Ng argued that Singapore does not need a new law to deal with abuse of domestic workers -- maids need to better understand their rights under existing law and how to seek redress by going to the authorities. Hence, the GOS has concentrated on public outreach and education to make maids aware of their rights and the resources available to them. Ng acknowledged that Singapore is not up to the standards of other developed countries, and said it would introduce still more protection. He did not think Singapore has very large numbers of unreported abuse cases.

¶6. Ng said that the government had decided that legislating a rest day for maids would not be productive. First, the Singapore government is loath to interfere with individuals entering into private contracts, Ng said. Second, the government believes that the current public debate on the issue is forcing people to realize for themselves that a day off is necessary, and that encouraging this process will ultimately be more effective than passing a difficult-to-enforce law.

HERBOLD